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AUTHOR Dillard, Mary L.
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ABSTRACT

Renewed interest in the connection between black English and reading difficulty warrants a summary of the groundwork laid in the 1960s and 1970s. Linguists have established the fact that black English is a legitimate language, that its speakers are not language deficient, and that the basic difference in black and standard English pertains to syntax, especially the verb system. How differences cause reading difficulty for children has also been addressed. W. Stewart considers the problem to be a structural conflict between the patterns of nonstandard dialect and the equivalent patterns of standard English. The similarities between the two languages also cause difficulty. Cultural differences often influence the teaching of reading, and many scholars agree on the need for professionals to know and respect the nonstandard language and culture. Some studies show that poor black parents are or can be an important part of their children's success in reading. The use of dialect readers as a transition to standard English remains controversial. The use of a foreign language or standard English as a second dialect approach has had some success. Various statistics seem to indicate that teachers are doing a better job of teaching reading to black students in the 1980s. (A five-page bibliography of specific research and authors is included.) (JD)

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Issues in Reading and Black English Revisited

Mary L. Dillard

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Thirteen years ago, possibly acting as fortune teller to the future we now live in, J. L. Dillard in Black English stated: "The language differences of the English-speaking Blacks in the United States are nothing new, although they are forever being rediscovered and new solutions for the resultant problems are being sought."[1] In an effort to stave off another rerun in the face of renewed interest in the topic, I offer the following brief summary of the most important issues we have faced in the discussion of the Black English and reading difficulty connection.

BLACK ENGLISH AS A LEGITIMATE LANGUAGE

To begin, many of the reappearing questions dealing with Black English have been answered and even make one wonder why such questions were raised. For example, just establishing the fact that such a legitimate language exists and that it has its own order took a great deal of convincing on the part of several linguists in the 60's and 70's. But in 1975 Dillard in his "General Introduction: Perspectives on Black English" was finally able to state that "...it is now generally recognized that there is a language variety called Black English...."[2] William A. Stewart, in "Continuity and Change in American Negro

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Dialects," concurred with Dillard's statement.[3]

LANGUAGE DEFICIENCY THEORY

Another question already answered is whether or not Black English speakers are deficient in language. Basically, present day educators see differences rather than deficits. Stewart, in "On the Use of Negro Dialect in the Teaching of Reading," stated:

> ...it should become apparent that language differences, as opposed to language deficits, may well account for most of the chronic difficulty which so many lower-class Negro children have with standard English in the classroom and, later, on the job.[4]

And speaking for the linguists, Dillard, in Black English, stated:

> To the linguist the link between human language and human intelligence is so close that it is risking a very drastic conclusion indeed to assume that any person or group of persons is "limited" or "deprived" in language.[5]

To take the case a step further, Stewart comments on the implications and outcomes of language deficit theory:

> ...the acceptance by educators of deficit theories is facilitated by the fact that, just like their psychological gurus, few educators are familiar enough with lower-class Negro life to know how badly such theories represent it, and by the fact that any conceptual inadequacies in psychological research designs for measuring lower-class Negro performance on standardized tests are likely to be effectively obscured by impressive test specifications (masking the inappropriateness of the tests), by elaborate statistical analyses (masking the irrelevance of the variables), and by complicated charts and graphs of the misleading or prevaricating results.[6]

Bernard A. Mohan in "Sociolinguistics and Context-Dependence" notes that William Labov has observed the contrast in the highly verbal Negro subculture and the poor verbal performance at school by Negro adolescents.[7] Joan C. Baratz, in "Teaching Reading in an Urban Negro School System" also states that there is no insufficient or underdeveloped linguistic system.[8]

DIFFERENCES IN BLACK AND STANDARD ENGLISH

The basic difference in Black and Standard English pertains to syntax, especially the verb system. Among

the many good articles on differences in Black and Standard English is Joan G. Fickett's "Ain't, Not, and Don't in Black English," which offers insight into the differences in use of tense:

> Because it has a system of tenses which indicates degrees of pastness and degrees of futurity, it can talk about how long ago things didn't happen, or how far ahead they aren't going to happen. English does not do this in its verb system; Black English does.[9]

Stewart makes the point that those interested in language have not recognized the importance of grammar but rather have focused on pronunciation and vocabulary. In "Continuity and Change," Stewart states:

> One further reason why both language teachers and dialectologists have failed to appreciate the extent to which non-standard Negro dialects may differ from non-standard white dialects...may simply be that such differences now remain mostly in syntax (i.e. grammatical patterns and categories) rather than in vocabulary or lexico-phonology (i.e.word forms), and are thus not normally uncovered by the word-comparison techniques which dialectologists and non-linguists rely on so heavily.[10]

Baratz also notes the differences in syntax in "Teaching Reading in an Urban Negro School System."[11] For a further discussion of the differences in Black English and Standard English see J. L. Dillard's Black English, Chapter Two, "On the Structure of Black English." His focus on syntax is especially useful.

Research into syntactic differences has not stopped. Dillard, in his Lexicon of Black English, suggests discourse differences which may be "deeper" and more persistent -- as well as less amenable to traditional teaching, since schoolbooks are typically not aware of discourse as a structural level -- than sentence-level syntax.[12] He also suggests in "Black English: Two Approaches,"[13] that certain other structural patterns at the sentence level, like differences in derivational patterns, may have a greater influence on the reading and writing problems of Black English speakers than do the now-familiar diagnostic structures like minimal contrast between he busy (right now) and he be busy (all the time). Mufwene's recent researches, although focused on Gullah, suggest a difference in discourse anaphora extending even to patterns of use of articles which strongly emphasizes the possibility of "strangeness" for a Black English-speaking first grader facing even a basal reader in which the vocabulary is relatively familiar and the orthography is not especially disruptive.[14]

DIFFERENCES THAT CAUSE READING DIFFICULTIES

After establishing the fact that Black English is indeed a language with its own rules and that its speakers are not language deficient, another question already answered for reading teachers seems to be centered on how differences cause reading difficulty for the child. William A. Stewart, in "Sociolinguistic Factors in the History of American Negro Dialects," finds that this type of language problem

> ...is the purely structural conflict between on the one hand the patterns of a non-standard dialect which an individual may have learned at home or in peer-group interaction, and on the other hand the equivalent patterns of standard English -- the language of modern technology and of the middle class.[15]

He also sees difficulties stemming from the many similarities between the two languages: "...the many similarities between any Negro dialect and standard English make it difficult to tell exactly where one leaves off and the other begins."[16] Margaret S. Steffensen, Ralph E. Reynolds, Erica McClure, and Larry F. Guthrie studied the reading comprehension of third, sixth, and ninth grade speakers of Black English Vernacular and concluded that their findings could be attributed to differences that exist

in the verbal systems of standard English and Black English.[17]

If educators have misunderstood not only differences in the two languages but misunderstood which differences are important in causing reading difficulties, it is not because they have not been warned. Joan C. Baratz states: "Understanding that the inner-city child speaks a language that is well-ordered, but different in many respects from standard English, is crucial to understanding how to educate him."[18] And William Stewart spoke to the overwhelming task young Black English speakers face in learning to read standard English:

> ... the problem is made more difficult by the fact that they are unfamiliar, not only with the sound-spelling-meaning correspondences of many of the words, but even with the grammatical patterns which these words make up in their reading lessons. Consequently, the reading achievement of these children becomes dependent upon their own success in deciphering standard English sentence structure.[19]

Baratz and Stewart early on saw the problem of dialect interference in reading. Stewart speaks of the problem in "Teaching Blacks to Read Against Their Will,"[20] and in "On the Use of Negro Dialect in the Teaching of Reading."[21] Baratz, in "Teaching Reading in an Urban Negro School

System" finds not only that the educational system is unable to teach the Black child to read, "...but very quickly teaches him to regard himself as intellectually inadequate, and therefore, of low self-worth and low social value." [22]

INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ON THE TEACHING OF READING

The problem of the relationship of reading difficulties to Black English extends to a consideration of the importance of cultural differences and the influences of those differences on the teaching of reading. Stewart, in "On the Use of Negro Dialect in the Teaching of Reading," states:

> ...were a difference in intellectual performance to be found between two populations in almost any other part of the world, it would be considered a matter of course to explore first the possibility that the apparent intellectual disparity might merely reflect cultural differences between the two groups through a bias in the measurement techniques toward one or the other culture. In the United States, on the other hand, only the scantiest consideration has been given to the same possibility -- that being "white" and "Negro" might involve correlations with more or less different American subcultures, and that cultural differences might therefore be responsible for the intellectual performance disparity between the two ethnic groups.[23]

Stewart points out differences in musical styles, patterns of worship, dress, and expressive behavior as examples of these differences. Kenneth R. Johnson also points out some differences, such as differences in expressive behavior. Examples of this behavior that is often misunderstood by the middle class teacher include sending messages by rolling the eyes, not looking directly in the eye, and taking a limp stance. A young Black male's slow walk or a young Black woman's pivoting quickly on both feet and then walking quickly away can also be misinterpreted. Other behavior that is different includes the movement and fluctuation in a group which is discussing a light topic, the rapping stance used for a romantic approach or showing trust by turning one's back.[24] Along this same line, Herbert L. Foster did an extensive study, Ribbin', Jivin', and Playin' the Dozens, to show the lack of understanding on the part of middle-class teachers based on cultural differences. [25] Cultural differences also showed up in Delain, Pearson and Anderson's "Reading Comprehension and Creativity in Black Language Use." The authors found that "Black language ability influences figurative comprehension indirectly through its effect on sounding skills."[26] In their discussion of Black language patterns they discuss the importance of signifying, marking and sounding.

The search into cultural differences has also probed into the environment of the young Black English speaker.

Stewart, for example, notes the lack of knowledge of this environment by most professionals:

> Although English teachers, speech therapists and other language-oriented educators are now dedicating themselves more than ever to the task of helping disadvantaged children -- and especially disadvantaged Negro children -- acquire proficiency in standard English, very few of these dedicated professionals have demonstrated any real understanding of the language characteristics of the communities from which these children come. [27]

What many of those interested in the problem do agree on is the need for the professionals to know and respect the nonstandard language and its culture. Stewart warns that teachers

> ...are likely to find their efforts hampered by too limited a knowledge of the structural characteristics of whatever non-standard dialect the children speak. For in all too many cases, the best pedagogical grasp of the structural features of a particular non-standard dialect will consist of little more than a list of certain "folk" pronunciations and an awareness of the use of such grammatical shibboleths as <u>ain't</u> and the double negative. Unfortunately, this kind of superficial knowledge of the structural details of the speech of disadvantaged children will not only prevent the teacher

or therapist from understanding the reasons for many of these children's "mistakes" in standard English, but it is also likely to lead to an inadvertent lumping together of children who speak different dialects (and therefore who have different kinds of problems with standard English) under a generalized remedial English approach which would not take these differences into account.[28]

Jack E. Williams, in "Racism: The Fourth R," strongly makes a plea for respect for cultural differences on the part of middle class teachers when he says, "...[a] condescending, if not contemptuous, attitude toward lower-class individuals...serves to create conflict and diminish any possibility of establishing mutual respect. Individuals who are perceived as 'uneducable heathens' invariably become so."[29] Marguerite B. Bougere also records, in "Dialect and Reading Disabilities," such an attitude by others, including many of those who wrote about the Ann Arbor decision in which Black parents won a court battle to see that the school system's teachers learned about Black English. Over and over, the literature on the subject of Black English and reading suggests this need for respect for and knowledge of Black English on the part of teachers. Bernice E. Cullinan, in her Issues in Black English and Reading, answers her own question, do teachers need to know about Black English, affirmatively and also offers a good bibliography of resources to help them do so.

FAMILY AND ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

In answer to the attack on the environment of the inner-city Black child and on the lack of family support in the home, Stewart states:

> ...there is no real evidence that lower-class environments are significantly more noisy or less structured than middle-class ones, nor is it clear just how noise levels, say, of an inner-city magnitude would stultify cognitive or linguistic development. And in view of the importance of the peer-group as a source of language models for the growing child, it seems quite risky to assume that parental involvement is an absolute necessity in even first-language acquisition. This would especially be true in lower-class Negro families, where there are usually several siblings and many, many playmates.[30]

More recent studies conducted by educators show that poor Black parents are or can be an important part of their children's success in reading. Dolores Durkin, in "Poor Black Children Who Are Successful Readers: An Investigation," reports her findings that many Black children could read before they entered school and that early reading by these poor Black children was influenced by adults and older children in the home.[31] Walberg, Bole, and

Waxman, in "School-Based Family Socialization and Reading Achievement in the Inner City," discuss findings that show greater improvement in reading achievement by students in a program at Ulysses Grant Elementary School on Chicago's west-side whose parents were involved in a program to help the parents create conditions in the home to stimulate academic achievement. [32]

WHAT CAN WE DO?

If at this stage we can say that we have established the legitimacy of Black English as a language and that it and the culture it represents cause difficulty in the teaching and learning of reading, then we might ask as our last question what can be done about it. We might even start such a discussion with what not to do. For example, Baratz, in "Teaching Reading in an Urban School System," suggests that "The continued failure of programs of reading for ghetto children that offer more of the same, i.e. more phonics, more word drills, etc., have indicated the need of a new orientation towards teaching inner-city children to read."[33]

The use of dialect readers, the basis of a great controvery of the 70's, is something else many educators

spurn. Examples of such programs include Bridge, a Cross-Culture Reading Program designed by Gary Simpkins, Grace Holt, and Charlesetta Simpkins and published by Houghton Mifflin. Written on reading levels 2.0-4.0, it was designed for underachieving junior and senior high school students. Another good representative of dialect readers is the Psycholinguistics Reading Series, a set of beginning readers developed by Olga J. Davis, Mildred R. Gladney, and Lloyd Leaverton as part of an experimental project supported by the Illinois Plan for Program Development for Gifted Students, the Office of Public Instruction of the State of Illinois, and the City of Chicago Board of Education.

While such educators as Kenneth Goodman opposed the readers, others did find them to serve as a useful transition to standard English. Kenneth Goodman, in "Dialect Barriers to Reading Comprehension," suggests that such readers are impractical and that Black children should read standard materials in their own dialect. He emphasizes that "In reading instruction, the focus must be on learning to read. No attempt to change the child's language must be permitted to enter into this process or interfere with it."[34] In the same vein, Bonnie Lass, in "Improving Reading Skills," summarizes the implications of her study:

> ...attempts to make written material more like black English or to make black English more like standard seem fruitless in terms of improving the reading skills of black English speakers. Instead, changes in

> teacher attitudes about the dialect as well as increased knowledge about it seem warranted.[35]

Others, on the other hand, found the use of the readers to be successful with the students. Lloyd Leaverton, for example, found "...a definite trend in favor of the experimental group"[36] in his experiment with their use.

James E. Jackson, while not using dialect readers as such, does urge the use of Black English as a source for beginning reading and as a way to respect the child and his culture.[37] While supporting the use of the dialect readers, Baratz and Stewart discuss their purpose. Baratz, in "Teaching Reading in An Urban Negro School System," states:

> The overwhelming evidence of the role that language interference can play in reading failure indicates that perhaps one of the most effective ways to deal with the literacy problems of Negro ghetto youth is to teach them using vernacular texts that systematically move from the syntactic structures of the ghetto community to those of the standard English speaking community.[38]

Stewart used the readers to test the linguistic proposition that "...the change in syntax toward the language of the child will aid the child in acquiring beginning reading

skills."[39] Roger Shuy also endorsed the readers: "If the major focus in the teaching of reading is on getting meaning from printed page to the reader's consciousness, there should be no hesitation about developing materials which match the child's grammatical system."[40]

Baratz and Stewart make clear that use of dialect readers is transitional, but their statements could not quell the emotional tide released by their use. In fact, the emotional reaction to them reminds one of the emotional reaction that still permeates the air of any discussion of the use of Black English as a transition to the use of standard English. Somehow the word "transition" gets lost in the ensuing shuffle. Many middle-class Blacks find the use of the dialect readers and Black English itself embarrassing and are hostile to them. Stewart tried to make clear that the readers were not for all Black children. He stated, "In particular, one should guard against the danger of assuming that Negro-dialect materials will be appropriate for <u>all</u> Negro school children."[41] And as to the word "transition," Baratz made clear that the "...success of ...a reading program would be dependent upon the child's ultimate ability to read standard English."[42] Opposition to the readers, though, remained strong and came from varied groups.

With so much opposition to the use of the readers, experiments and studies withered. But another useful approach to solving the reading problem that has seemed to survive is the use of a foreign-language or standard English as a second dialect approach. For example, Stewart states:

> ...the learning of standard English by speakers of Negro dialect is more like foreign-language learning than it is like first-language learning. For this reason, techniques which have been developed in foreign-language teaching to deal with structural conflicts between different language systems are being found to be much more appropriate for teaching standard English patterns to Negro-dialect speakers than are the pathology-oriented methods of traditional speech therapy and remedial English.[43]

Raven I. McDavid agrees with Stewart on the subject. He states:

> The educational advancement of this new urban group -- which means basically the improvement of their ability to read -- constitutes the greatest challenge to American education. It is likely that teaching some form of standard English as a second language will be necessary; and it might be easier to start this second language in the kindergartens or earlier....[44]

Our past shows us that we know that Black English exists, that it causes problems for reading students, and that we have earnestly tried to do something about it. So where have we been for the past ten years? What problems remain unsolved? Are we in the 1980's really doing any better in the teaching of reading to Black students? Various statistics seem to show that indeed we are. Let us hope that reading teachers along with their students continue to grow and learn. Let's not take time out to reinvent the wheel. Instead, let us learn from those of the 60's and 70's who spent a great deal of effort to lay the groundwork for our success in the 80's.

Notes

[1]J.L. Dillard, Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 265

[2]J.L. Dillard, ed., Perspectives on Black English (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p.9.

[3]William A. Stewart, "Continuity and Change in American Negro Dialects," in Perspectives on Black English, ed. J.L. Dillard (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 234.

[4]William A. Stewart, "On the Use of Negro Dialect in the Teaching of Reading," in Teaching Black Children to Read, eds. Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy (Washington. D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), pp. 167-168.

[5]Dillard, Black English, p. 31.

[6]Stewart, "Negro Dialect," p. 164.

[7]Bernard A. Mohan, "Sociolinguistics and Context-Dependence," in Linguistic Perspectives on Black English, ed. Philip A. Luelsdorff (Regensbury: Verlag Hans Carl, 1975), p. 94.

[8]Joan C. Baratz, "Teaching Reading in an Urban Negro School System," in Teaching Black Children to Read, eds. Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), pp. 92-115.

[9]Joan G. Fickett, "Ain't, Not, and Don't in Black English," in Perspectives on Black English, ed. J.L. Dillard (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 90.

[10]Stewart, "Continuity and Change," p. 243.

[11]Baratz, "Teaching Reading," p. 97.

[12]J.L. Dillard, Lexicon of Black English (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), pp. 129-142.

[13]J.L. Dillard, "Black English: Two Approaches," Language Policy and Language Planning, 7, no. 2 (1983), pp. 179-187.

[14]Salikokos Mufwene, "Number Delimitation in Gullah," American Speech, 61, no. 1 (1986), 33-60.

[15]William A. Stewart, "Sociolinguistic Factors in the History of American Negro Dialects," in Perspectives on Black English, ed. J.L. Dillard (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 223.

[16]Stewart, "Continuity and Change," pp. 239-240.

[17]Margaret S. Steffensen, Ralph E. Reynolds, Erica McClure, and Larry F. Guthrie, "Black English Vernacular and Reading Comprehension: A Cloze Study of Third, Sixth, and Ninth Graders." Journal of Reading Behavior, 19, no.3 (1982), 285-298.

[18]Baratz, "Teaching Reading," p. 93.

[19]Stewart, "Continuity and Change," p. 239.

[20]William A. Stewart, "Teaching Blacks to Read Against Their Will," in Linguistic Perspectives on Black English, ed. Philip A. Luelsdorff (Regensbury: Verlag Hans Carl, 1975), p. 113.

[21]Stewart, "Negro Dialect," p. 182.

[22]Baratz, "Teaching Reading," p. 92.

[23]Stewart, "Negro Dialect," p. 165.

[24]Kenneth R. Johnson, "Black Kinesics -- Some non-Verbal Communication Patterns in the Black Culture," in Perspectives on Black English, ed. J.L. Dillard (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 296-306.

[25]Herbert L. Foster, Ribbin', Jivin', and Playin' the Dozens (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1974).

[26]Marsha Taylor Delain, P. David Pearson, and Richard C. Anderson, "Reading Comprehension and Creativity in Black Language Use: You Stand to Gain by Playing the Sounding Game!" American Educational Research Journal, 22, no. 2 (1985), 155.

[27]Stewart, "Continuity and Change," p. 240.

[28]Stewart, "Continuity and Change," p. 241.

[29]Jack E. Williams, "Racism: The Fourth R," in Social Perspectives on Reading, ed., James B. Macdonald (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1973), p. 17.

[30]Stewart, "Negro Dialect," p. 163.

[31]Delores Durkin, "Poor Black Children Who Are Successful Readers: An Investigation," Urban Education 19, no. 1 (1984), 53-76.

[32]Herbert J. Walberg, Robert E. Bole, and Hersholt C. Waxman, "School-Based Family Socialization and Reading Achievement in the Inner City," Psychology in the Schools, 17, no. 4 (1980), 509-514.

[33]Baratz, "Teaching Reading," p. 114.

[34]Kenneth S. Goodman, "Dialect Barriers to Reading Comprehension," in Teaching Black Children to Read, eds., Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), p. 27.

[35]Bonnie Lass, "Improving Reading Skills: The Relationship Between the Oral Language of Black English Speakers and their Reading Achievement," Urban Education, 14, no. 4 (1980), 446.

[36]Lloyd Leaverton, "Dialectal Readers -- Rationale, Use and Value," in Language Differences -- Do They Interfere? eds., Roger W. Shuy and J. Laffey (Newark, Del,: International Reading Association, 1973), p. 122.

[37]James E. Jackson, "Some Psychosocial Factors Affecting Learning to Read and Reading for Disadvantaged Black Children," The Negro Education Review, 32, no. 2 (1981), 25.

[38]Baratz, "Teaching Reading," p. 114.

[39]Stewart, "Teaching Blacks," p. 116.

[40]Roger W. Shuy, "Some Language and Cultural Differences in a Theory of Reading," in Psycholinguistics and the Teaching of Reading, eds., Kenneth S. Goodman and James T. Fleming (Newart, Del,: International Reading Association, 1969), p. 42.

[41]Stewart, "Negro Dialect," p. 190.

[42]Baratz, "Teaching Reading," p. 113.

[43]Stewart, "Negro Dialect," p. 168.

[44]Raven I. McDavid, Jr., "Dialectology and the Teaching of Reading," in Teaching Black Children to Read, eds., Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), p. 10.

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